

oh, let's not call it love

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by [vreaa \(aitnes\)](#)

Summary

And it's moments like these, where it's just the two of them, where Dream looks at him like he's the sun and the moon and everything in between, that he dares to hope. That he dares to imagine. What would it be like, for them to have each other?

Five times Dream says "I love you", and the one time George says it back.

Notes

hi :)) gentle reminder that dnf and karlnap is just for fun lmaoo don't shove the ship in the ccs' faces!!! also this is kinda like a post-ender dragon thing and i was thinking of actually writing the process?? but idk HAHAH it sounds like a lot of commitment

also,, the title is from 99.9 by jeremy zucker because i absolutely adore him and his music :)) enjoy, you dnf kinnies >:)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Ender Dragon has been defeated. Slain. Dream's victorious beam is still fresh in George's mind, and he can still feel the warmth of Dream's embrace from when they'd defeated it.

We did it, George, we did it! Dream's voice had been breathless with wonder, and the euphoria in his tone had been contagious — George had smiled too, wide and blinding. Sapnap had momentarily forgotten the twisted leg he'd sported and attempted a jump, punching his fist in the air, and Dream and George had caught him, laughing as they supported Sapnap's weight with their own.

They're free now. They've completed the quest Dream had set out to do, and they're free. Free and *alive*.

George thinks the latter is the most important bit, as he watches Karl's tray of bread clatter to the floor whilst its owner sprints towards Sapnap, wasting no time in wrapping the crutch-wielding boy in a hug. The two exchange hushed words of relief and affection, and the scene is so heartwarming that George can't help but let a fond smile creep onto his face.

Dream moves to stand beside him, bumping their shoulders together and eliciting a huff of laughter, and they stay like that — quiet, peaceful, together. All their worries and fears, gone.

George can forget about the dull ache in his left arm in that moment, can forget about wounds littered across Dream's back and the barely closed gash on Sapnap's shoulder. Those will heal. It'll just take time.

Time that they have.

Sapnap and Karl are still holding each other, smiles wide and fingers interlaced. George looks at them, and a curious sort of wistfulness tugs at his gut. His eyes flicker to Dream, and for a second he thinks Dream is looking at him, too, behind the smooth, unmoving mask. The memory of Dream's arms around him flits through his mind, and he wonders what it would feel like to hug him again.

Dream shifts, and the moment is gone. Wordlessly, they move towards the cottage they'd built and left behind, just on the outskirts of the village Karl lives in.

"I kinda just wanna sleep through the rest of the day," Dream yawns, posture slackening as their cottage comes into sight.

George nods his head in silent agreement, weary exhaustion from travelling the distance between the Stronghold and Karl's Village sweeping over him.

It's just the two of them now — the sun's golden rays are slowly sinking into the horizon and the villagers are scurrying into their homes, wooden doors clicking shut as they get ready for bed.

Dream seems to notice this, and George watches, with something strange curling in his stomach, as the other man adjusts his mask and moves it to the side. The slight awe that fills him at the sight of Dream's face never seems to leave him no matter how many times he's seen it, whispering hints of *something more* against his ears and pumping his heart so fast that it thunders against his chest.

Gold-spun locks bounce against Dream's forehead, framing his face nicely. The fading sunlight hits him in a way that makes him glow, and when their eyes lock, George feels his breath hitch.

"Hey," Dream says softly, eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiles.

"Hey," George says back, quiet. The smile that pushes at his own cheeks is wide.

They reach the fence gate surrounding their cottage, with George carefully unhinging it to reveal the dirt path leading to their home, and George takes in a breath to soak in the feeling of familiarity. They'd come home just in time for the seeds Sapnap had planted earlier in the year to grow and bear fruit, ripe beetroot and fresh carrots decorating the little garden in their front yard.

"Home, sweet home." Dream muses, unslinging his backpack to fish around for the house keys.

They continue down the path and stop before the cottage door. Dream continues on his valiant attempt to search for the house keys while George supervises him, looking on with a grin as the items in Dream's backpack rustle and knock against each other.

"How much stuff do you even *have* in there?" George asks, laughter tinging his words.

Dream sniffs imperiously. "I am a man who possesses many things that are of great importance."

George snorts. "Like the broken pieces of your first wooden pickaxe?"

Dream pauses his rummaging to nail him with a look that sends him into a fit of giggles. "These things hold *sentimental value*, George," the blonde purses his lips in mock distaste, before a triumphant grin pulls at them as he extracts a shiny, metallic key from his bag of "important things". "And there! I found it!"

"Luckily you did," George shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans, smile never leaving his face, "or else we would've had to break into our own house."

Dream laughs at that, loud and exuberant. It echoes into the empty house as the door swings open, and liveliness seeps into their months-abandoned home. Dream strikes a match and relights the burnt-out lamps in the living room, illuminating the surprisingly clean state of their cottage.

"Karl's been here," Dream remarks, picking up a note on their oak dining table. George peers over the taller man's shoulder and sweeps his eyes across the days-old paper. *You're welcome*, is all it reads, and signing off is a nostalgic *honk :p*.

"Yeah. Pretty nice of him, don't you think?" They're so close that he's practically breathing down Dream's neck, and for a moment he wonders what it would be like, to lower his head and fit his chin over the curve of Dream's shoulder, to wrap his arms around his waist and hug him from behind.

Dream hums, seemingly completely unbothered by their closeness, and the normalcy of his words digs into George like the sharp corner of a table. "We'll have to thank him properly tomorrow."

George nods, quiet, and watches as Dream yawns again. He stretches, back arching and hands pushing into the air, and George looks away from the strip of skin revealed when his shirt lifts.

"I think I'm gonna go to bed, now." George says abruptly. Dream recollects himself and blinks at him, tired eyes barely managing to comprehend, before breaking into a sleepy smile.

"Okay. I'll go get Sapnap, then. Someone's gotta make sure he doesn't get too excited and break his leg." Dream brings down his hands and lets his right palm rest on George's hair, ruffling it. "Goodnight, Georgie. Love you."

It's pretty much tradition at this point. Dream says this every night before any of the three of them go to bed, a - quite plainly, unneeded - reminder of his affection for them, and George knows he

doesn't mean it in *that* way, that way that a small part of George wants him to, but it doesn't stop something in George's chest from exploding into a million tiny warm things. "Goodnight, Dream."

"George! Behind you!"

George hears the sound of bones rattling and spins, eyes set and sword clutched tightly between his fingers, just in time to see a blur of green and white move past him and strike his potential attacker. The skeleton's head plops to the ground with a hollow sort of sound, the rest of its bones collapsing in a heap right by it.

"I saved you, George!" Dream stands proudly by the pile of bones, axe resting by his thigh and hands on his hips like he's some kind of *superhero*, and George can't help but stifle a laugh.

"I didn't *need* your saving," he says, but he's smiling so widely his cheeks hurt.

"Didn't look like that to me," Sapnap chimes in, voice teasing, "you *totally* needed saving, George."

"Yeah," Dream added, "you just turned around with that *scared* look and stood there like some *damsel in distress*!"

Indignance flushes George's cheeks. "I did *not*!" He huffs and resumes their journey back home, chin high and back straight, "And that wasn't me being scared, I was just surprised!"

"You don't need to lie to us, Georgie," Dream coos, "it's okay to be scared-"

"I was *not* scared!"

"Sure you weren't."

"I *wasn't*!"

"Hey," Sapnap pipes up from in front of them, "if you two are done fighting, *Princess* George and Sir Dream, will you pick up the pace? I'm craving beef stew right about now."

George gapes. "*Sapnap!* You aren't supposed to *encourage* this— oh, who am I even kidding." He throws his hands in the air and groans.

Dream's laugh bursts into a wheeze, reverting to what Sapnap likes to call his "tea kettle form". The chuckles that spill from his lips are sun-bright and open, full of unrestrained amusement and joy. He doubles over and clutches at his stomach, his uncontrolled laughter trickling into George's ears and making George's own lips tickle with a smile.

Dream is pretty, laughing in the sunlight. His blonde curls catch the rays in a way that makes them glitter, and George thinks somewhere along the line they must have caught his breath too, because all of a sudden he can't breathe.

“After you, milady,” Dream recollects himself temporarily and bows, low and mocking.

George ignores him, pressing down the smile threatening to usurp the neutral look he has on, and opts to walk faster away from him instead. His heartbeat is loud in his ears as he power-walks away.

“Just admit it, George,” Dream drawls from right beside him, and George curses the other man’s stupid long legs and wide strides, “I’m essentially your knight in shining armor. You’d be dead without me by now.”

“And that’s facts!” Sapnap calls, far behind them.

George waves them off. “Shining armor my *ass*,” he scoffs, “your chestplate still has stains from that time you spilled pumpkin soup all over it!”

The reminder brings back memories of warm hugs and warmer soup, hearty laughs and a raging fireplace. He and Dream had fallen asleep on the couch that night, after spending the earlier parts of it listening to the various music discs they’ve collected, and George can still feel the tingle from where their shoulders had touched, can still feel Dream’s body heat mingling with his own.

“Oh my God, George!” Sapnap gasps in teasing affrontation, fanning himself, and George zones back in to stare at him quizzically.

“Young lady!” Dream lifts his hand and holds it over his mask where his mouth should have been. “What coarse language!” His mask manages to hide whatever expression he has on, but the lilt to his voice doesn’t fail to alert George of the smile he’s most certainly hiding.

“You’re both assholes.” George says, trying and failing to suppress the grin squeezing its way onto his lips. He jogs ahead of them, shaking his head in disappointed disapproval as Sapnap gives another deep gasp, and it’s only then that he lets the smile fully form.

“Love you, George!” Dream yells from behind.

George’s smile does not grow. His stomach does not do flips and his chest does not fill with something sticky and honey-like, and that something does not muddle his thoughts and send him into a giddy spiral of joy.

His heart drums a liar’s beat against his ribcage.

It’s just him and Dream looking for treasure today, with Sapnap having blown them off for another date with Karl, and they spend most of their journey complaining about their bandana-wearing friend.

“We’ve been replaced, George,” Dream bemoans, but there’s an undercurrent of fondness in his voice.

George merely nods in agreement. “Simp.”

And then they move on, repeatedly studying the map George had traded off the new cartographer in the village in search of the hidden treasure. They journey across plains and forests, wade through rivers and leap carefully over ravines; check caves, hike across hills, and after three days of non-stop adventuring, they find it.

“Here it is, George,” Dream says. George watches as he carefully maneuvers the wooden boat they’re in over a specific spot in the ocean. He can tell that Dream’s excited from the unmasked glee in his voice, the anticipated tensing in his shoulders, the curve to his lips. “We’re on the ‘X’ in the map.”

George glances, concerned, to the setting sun on their left. He knows he doesn’t see the colours in the sky like most people do, but the gradient sweeping across the heavens is all he’s ever known and the way the sun melts into the horizon still takes his breath away.

“Shouldn’t we wait ‘til tomorrow morning, Dream?” He asks. The sun continues to sink into the sea. “It’s getting dark and… I don’t know, I don’t have a very good feeling about this.”

“Nah,” Dream says. He picks up a shovel on the bottom of their boat. “I’ll be fine. It’ll only take a while for me to dig up the treasure, anyway. This part of the ocean’s still quite shallow.”

George just looks at him, brown eyes meticulously going over every detail of his features. Committing them to memory.

Dream sighs. “You think too much, Georgie.” He grins, lopsided and familiar, and George’s heart does a quick skip. “I have the Turtle Shell Helmet too, remember?”

He points towards the green helmet sitting upon his head, and George relents. “Fine,” he says, biting down a smile when Dream lets out a small whoop, “but be quick.”

“I will.” Dream grins cheekily and starts pulling off his hoodie. George blinks and averts his gaze, turning his head so fast he thinks he’s gotten a whiplash. Dream laughs at that, a sound that makes George feel like he’s floating, before depositing his mask and hoodie into George’s hands. “Take care of these for me, please?”

He doesn’t wait for an answer before he slips over the boat and sinks into the dark water, quickly angling himself in the right direction before going deeper. George watches as he glides through the seawater, looking absolutely in his element, and thumbs the plastic mask worriedly when he disappears from view.

He’ll be okay, George reasons with himself. He’s rather bad at dying.

His stomach refuses to listen to him, though, and it churns with heartfelt worry.

Quickly lighting a torch with a flint and steel, he holds the flame to the surface of the water as close as he can without extinguishing it. The bright tendrils of fire leap across the surface, sending waves of heat to warm George’s face, but does nothing to make the scene underwater any more apparent.

He can see further on the surface now, though, and he eyes a Drowned lurking just barely within the reach of the torch’s light. The Drowned doesn’t seem to have noticed him yet, judging by how passive it is acting, but a sense of unease still crawls into George’s chest.

“Hurry up, Dream,” he murmurs, worry coating his tongue and sending thrums of anxiety through his veins. The night might be young, but it’s dangerous nonetheless.

There's a sudden movement amongst the swirls of black water, and George immediately perks up.

Dream propels himself through the water quickly, the air bubbles rising from his lips fast and great in quantity, and when George squints, he sees why. There are at least three Drowned on his tail, accompanied by a Gurgler holding up its trident menacingly as they chase after him.

George's breath catches in his throat and his heartbeat is loud in his ears, panic and fear seizing all logical thoughts in his brain. *Dream*, he thinks, as he peers over the edge of the boat worriedly, gaze fixated on the Drowned after him as if staring would make them go away.

The trident-wielding Gurgler readies to fling its weapon at Dream, and George can't help the cry that slips past his lips as he watches Dream narrowly miss the trident aimed at him.

George dumps Dream's belongings onto the boat. There's no way Dream will be able to handle this alone, he has to go and *help*, go and *save him*—

Dream glances up just as George moves to extinguish the torch in the seawater and shakes his head violently. George hesitates.

And that's where it all goes wrong.

The Drowned catch up to Dream. That moment of distraction where Dream, the stupid, *stupid* boy, had been more concerned about *George's safety* than his *own* when *he'd* been the getting chased, was enough for the Drowned to swim up to him and latch on to any parts of him they can reach.

The panic that strikes George is lightning-hard, electrifying him and making him freeze in his spot as he watches Dream thrash around in the three Drowned's holds, futilely trying to escape from their clutches.

If there's one thing Dream has never been able to perfect, it would be underwater combat. For how good of a swimmer he is it's amazing how bad he is at fighting underwater, and George gets it. With water resistance everything is harder, from swinging to dodging to stabbing, and Dream is so much more used to the fluidity and control the air allows him.

The Drowned start to go deeper, and Dream sinks along with them. The huge stone in George's gut does the same, and his mind is screaming at him to move move *move* but he *can't*, but *Dream*—

He unglues himself from the boat and leaps into the water, letting his torch fall into the water and die while his hands adjust to gripping his sword handle. The water is cold against his skin and the minerals in the seawater sting his eyes as he pushes himself downwards, but the only thoughts running through his head are *Dream* and *not him, please*, and anxiety seizes him in its cobra-like hold.

Dream, having gotten even more sluggish the more he struggled, watches George swim to him with all his might and is suddenly rejuvenated, kicking and pulling away from the Drowned with much more vigor. He goes limp, suddenly, after a while, and George notes the way the bubbles that emerge from Dream's mouth are spaced between longer pauses of time and are much larger than the previous ones.

He's running out of air, George realises, horror echoing along the walls of his head, and determination floods through him as he continues to make his way down to Dream.

With a final boost, George can almost reach him. He stretches his hand out, ignoring the way his lungs protest against his chest and how his head feels like bursting from the pressure, and prays to Ender that Dream can still see him, can still take his hand and let George pull them out of here, but

Dream remains motionless amongst the Drowned, and George sees *red*.

He kicks against the water and swims down towards the Drowned, raising his sword with a strength he never knew he had and bringing it down onto the arms latching onto Dream. The force isn't enough to cut their hands off like George so achingly wants to, but it's enough to make them release their grip on Dream and reach for him instead.

George twists away from their rough, calloused hands and quickly swims to pull Dream towards the surface, his thought process a racing blur of *get Dream out* as he uses all the power in his legs to push them out of the water. His arms feel like lead and his lungs are positively *screeching* for air, spots blinking in and out of his vision, and George thinks he might die here, in this vast ocean so far away from home, but he thinks of Dream, light in his arms thanks to the density of water, and with a sudden burst of energy, his head breaks through the surface of the water.

He takes in air in greedy gulps, heaving Dream's head up and out of the water the moment the first breath of oxygen enters his lungs, feels something akin to blind panic grip him when Dream's head falls, limp, against his chest.

"Dream?" He says, furiously water-trapping with his feet to keep them afloat, and almost sobs when Dream gives a choked cough, seawater spilling from his lips as he rejoins him in the world of the wake.

Carefully maneuvering the man in his arms, George moves to paddle towards their boat. They reach it in a minute, with George nervously looking back every few seconds to check on the Drowned after them.

"Dream," George says, voice hushed, "I need you to hold on for me, okay?" Gingerly, he adjusts such that Dream is able to cling on to the sides of their boat, and quickly swims to the other side to get on board. It's a struggle balancing the boat and pushing himself up, but he eventually manages to get up.

Three moving shadows appear in the water and George's blood runs cold. "Come on, Dream," he murmurs, pulling the other man up by the armpits and coaxing him to cooperate. As soon as Dream is on the boat, George takes the boat by the oars and starts rowing, trying valiantly to tune out the soreness in his arms and focuses on getting them to shore. Back to the camp they'd set up last night.

God, last night seems like a forever ago, when they'd been sitting around a hot campfire, Dream's eyes glowing with an ember-like warmth as hearty laughs tumbled from his throat, and George can't lose that, can't lose *Dream*, so he rows and rows and rows and *rows*.

He doesn't even know when they hit land, his train of thought nothing but a muddled *Dream*, and it's only when said man attempts to get up that he's broken from his spell.

"Dream," he whispers, scrambling to help him up. Dream's skin is so, *so* cold against George's, and his chest *aches* when he feels the blonde shiver.

George slips an arm around Dream and supports his weight as they stumble towards the camp, which they'd – thankfully – made right next to the shore of the beach, and it's nothing but a stroke of pure luck that no other monsters come into view.

He sets down Dream gently on the sandy grass, and then clammers to relight the campfire, soot from last night's unused coal dusting his fingers and coating them a dull black. And then he's drying the flint and steel in his pocket, striking them against each other with a desperate frenzy

he's only ever encountered that one time Dream almost *died* to the Ender Dragon- no, now's not the time for that. He needs to focus. Dream needs him.

He lets out a breath when the fire is lit, flames exploding into existence before his eyes, before rushing back to Dream to help him nearer to the fire.

When the rush is over and they're sitting shoulder to shoulder, changed out of their soaking clothes, George lets himself process.

Waves of emotion surge within his chest, rising to crash and sting at his eyes, and George only keeps his gaze on the dancing flames as the world blurs before him.

"George?" Dream asks, tentative. George sees him tilt his head in confusion in the peripherals of his vision, as if he hadn't almost just fucking *died* back there, at the bottom of the ocean, because he let a couple of Drowned pull him down-

"George."

And then Dream's arm is around his shoulder, pulling him closer as his body shakes and tears slip from his eyes, and how can he just sit there like that, like George hadn't almost fucking *lost* him, hadn't almost let him sink to his death because he hadn't been fast enough?!

"I thought I- you-" George chokes out, and it *hurts*, "I was so- so fucking *scared*!"

"I'm sorry," Dream whispers, "I should have listened to you, we should have waited until morning-"

"I *hate* you," George says, but the words have no real bite, "how could you- what if-"

Dream's hold on him tightens. "I'm here," the blonde's voice shakes, "you saved me, George, you fucking saved my life." There's a pause, and then Dream chuckles. "For once."

George lets out a watery laugh. "You bet your fucking ass I did."

And suddenly, everything is okay again. Dream's alive. Here. With him. George hasn't lost him.

"Thank you," Dream looks down at him just as George twists his head to look up, and the sincerity in his gaze makes something warm bloom in George's chest. "I love you, George, I'd be dead by now if you hadn't-"

"Shut up," George cuts in, slapping a hand over Dream's mouth, and pretends his heart doesn't race at Dream's words, that his skin doesn't buzz at the contact with Dream's face.

Dream blinks, bewilderment clear in his eyes, and George bursts into a fit of giggles. It feels good to let it out, all the stress and anxiety, and when Dream joins in, George's heart has never felt fuller.

And they rest there, smiles on their faces, as the sun rises over the trees and the flames from their campfire slowly die out.

George prays Dream can't hear the thundering of his heartbeat when the blonde eventually gives in to sleep on his shoulder.

"*Sapnap*," Karl whines, "give it back!"

It's the last day of the year. The village bustles with a festive activity completely unknown to George. Usually the village is quiet, humble, everyone minding their own business as much as they can. Today, however, it seems as if the anticipation of a new beginning has gotten to the villagers too.

The sky is pitch black. George glances at the clock tower in the village square and deduces that it's eleven thirty right now, just half an hour remaining until the new year.

He turns his attention back onto the bickering couple before him. *Sapnap* has Karl's ice cream in hand and is holding it out of Karl's reach, seemingly amused by how the shorter man futilely attempts to swipe it back.

George sighs and wishes they would stop flaunting their relationship status in front of his face.

"Think about it, babe," *Sapnap* says, eyes twinkling with mischief as he devours half of the ice cream in one bite, "this is the *last* time we'll get to share an ice cream before the year ends!"

"But— my ice cream!" Karl protests, pouting. His arms flop back down to his sides and he tries another tactic instead, giving *Sapnap* the puppy eyes to try and win him over. *Sapnap*'s gleeful expression visibly melts into something soft at that, something George has never seen before and, quite frankly, never needs to see again.

"Stop being such a pig, *Sapnap*," he cuts in, giving *Sapnap* the final push over the edge as he rolls his eyes, "give Karl his ice cream back."

Sapnap sticks his tongue out at him, earning an exasperated sigh, but returns the ice cream to Karl.

Karl tiptoes and presses a kiss to *Sapnap*'s cheek, a sight George really does *not* need to see right now, and giggles when *Sapnap* leans down. George looks away.

Where's Dream when you need him? If George has to put up with their flirting alone for one more moment—

"Surprise," a familiar, low voice speaks into his ear and he immediately jumps away, shock jumpstarting his heartbeat.

"Dream!" George exclaims, an exasperated smile pushing its way onto his face.

Dream swings an arm around his shoulders. "Hello. Did you miss me?"

George scoffs, but makes no attempt to push him away. He finds he quite likes the grounding weight of Dream's arm, and the way he seems to fit perfectly in Dream's hold. "As if."

"Look, *Sapnap*, George's boyfriend is here!" Karl jumps in. *Sapnap* cackles.

George flushes, immediately noting how it must look like, and ducks away from Dream's arm, even as Dream snaps to attention and looks around, gaze darting from left to right.

"Where?" Dream asks, and *Sapnap* doubles over laughing.

"Dream and I aren't *dating*, Karl," George says hotly, embarrassment flooding his senses, "we aren't like you and Sapnap."

"Obviously," Karl drawls, the smirk on his face unrelenting, "because unlike *you guys*, Sap and I had the balls to admit that we *do* like each other. You two should take notes."

"Wha-?!" George shakes his head, wishing to the Nether that the heat in his face would die down.

Dream laughs. "Fuck off, Karl. We're not like that."

Dream's words hit him a little harder than they're supposed to. In a second, the flustered rush in his veins dies away.

He's telling the truth, George tells himself, *nothing but the truth*. And hadn't he just said it himself? There is no reason for him to get worked up over it. It's just a fact.

Dream and George aren't the way Sapnap and Karl are. Will never be.

(Maybe what hurts the most is how Dream basically confirmed it. That now Dream's said it himself, it becomes more real. Maybe a small part of George had been wishing for Dream to disagree with him, to prove that George had been wrong about the entire situation all along, that all the touches and glances and "I love you"'s had *meant* something—)

"Anyway," Sapnap starts, and George quickly pulls himself from his thoughts, shoving them into a corner of his mind to pour over later, "we didn't come here to discuss these two's love life, we came here to party!"

"Yeah," George says, and he can feel Dream's eyes on him. "What's the time now?"

"Eleven fifty." Dream answers. George furrows his brows. Dream's voice is softer than usual, like there's something holding him back. The blonde clears his throat and speaks in his normal tone, and George thinks he must have just imagined it.

"Before the night—"

"—year!" Sapnap interrupts.

"Year," Dream corrects, "ends, I would just like to say a few words."

The three of them eye him sceptically.

"Thank you guys for being the best people I've ever met." His lips spread in a wide smile, and George feels one of his own tug at his mouth. "We've been through so much together and you've all supported me in so many different ways, and I am so, *so* grateful to have you guys." There's a silence in which he turns and sweeps his gaze across all of them, and when his eyes land on George, all George sees in his green irises is raw honesty.

"I love you," Dream says, his gaze firmly locked onto George. George feels something akin to hope rise in his chest and his heart flutters hard and fast, like the wings of a hummingbird. The feeling remains when Dream continues, turning to look at Sapnap and Karl with a smile, "I love all of you, so much. Thank you for being here."

There's a pause, before Sapnap breaks the silence and scoffs. "You're going soft, Dreamie-poo," his raven-blue eyes twinkle with affection, "and if you wanted a hug, all you had to do was ask."

"Group hug!" Karl cheers, and before George knows it, he's pulled into their four-person embrace, arms quickly thrown over other's shoulders and their heads knocking together carelessly.

"Ten!" They hear a chorused shout and pull apart in slight alarm, looking around wildly for a few moments before realising it's the countdown to the new year.

"George!" Dream exclaims excitedly, swinging an arm back over George's shoulders. George can barely hear him over the sound of his own heartbeat and the chants of "Eight! Seven! Six!"

"Five!" In the corner of his eye, George can see Karl and Sapnap with their heads together, staring into each other's eyes adoringly as their hands intertwine, and when he turns to meet Dream's gaze, there's an intensity in it that reduces his legs to jelly.

"Four! Three! Two—" Is George imagining it, or is Dream moving closer? His breath hitches with anticipation and for a moment he thinks he thinks he *thinks*—

"One!"

"Happy New Year!" Dream roars, right into George's ear.

On cue, fireworks leap into the night sky and burst into thousands of tiny, dancing, lights, streaking across the pitch-black ether in specks of gold. At least, all George can *see* is gold, but he doesn't think he'd trade it for anything else, not when the sight still takes his breath away and leaves him in awe of the wonders of humanity.

His left ear still rings from Dream's scream, which had been immediately followed by the sound of fireworks exploding into existence, and he jerks away at the reminder of Dream's actions.

"Were you trying to make me go deaf?!" He cries, stomping down on the thin threads of disappointment drifting around in the puddle of his emotions. Now is not the time. Casting a disbelieving, indignant glare at the blonde in question, he shakes his head and keeps up the bit. "I can't believe this. My *best friend*—"

Dream falls apart into wheezes, and George is suddenly struck dumb by the way Dream looks when he's laughing. His eyes crinkle up at the corners and his lips turn up with joy, and the messy way his blonde locks fall over his forehead accompanied with the unadulterated bliss radiating from his chuckles leave George aching in a fragile, familiar way, gently tugging on his heartstrings and leaving him breathless.

"Come on, George," Dream says, catching his breath. Maybe it's just George, but he seems to glow with happiness, even in the dark. "You have to admit, it was funny."

George shoves him, the grin on his face impossibly wide. "Shut up."

With a last, breathy chuckle, Dream slips an arm around George's shoulders again and pulls him back close.

Maybe George sighs. Maybe he leans into Dream's touch, just a little. Maybe they stand there, quiet, as they watch the fireworks in the sky die out.

We aren't like that, George repeats in his head, almost like a mantra, as he forces down the part of him that revels in the contact with Dream, *we aren't like that.*

Maybe the line hurts a little more than he admits.

George hates truth or dare. Hates it with a passion, from the roots of his hair all the way down to the last layer of skin on his toes. Yet, when Sapnap calls him over to the living room to play it with him, Karl and Dream, George can't find it in himself to resist.

Maybe it's the fiery challenge in Sapnap's eyes. Maybe it's his sleep-addled brain. Maybe it's Dream, sitting cross-legged on their carpet opposite Sapnap, sending him a warm smile that ignites tingles in the crevices of his chest.

"Truth or dare, Georgie?" Sapnap poses as soon as George sits down, the corner of his lip quirked up slyly.

George gives him a wary look. He's known Sapnap long enough to know what all of his expressions mean, and he knows from experience that the one the black-haired man has on now promises nothing but trouble.

His eyes involuntarily wander to Dream, and the taller man only shrugs. However, George doesn't miss the haughty glint to Dream's eyes that practically *taunts* him into choosing dare, stoking the wildfire in his chest and causing the words to tumble from his lips.

"Dare," George chooses, and immediately feels dread sink into his gut when Sapnap's eyes light up in borderline maniacal delight.

"I dare you," Sapnap pauses, a smug smirk playing on his lips, "to tell Dream you love him."

What.

What.

"What?!" George finds himself at a loss, torn between laughing it off and freaking the *fuck* out, because what the *fuck*, Sapnap, what the *fuck*.

"It's easy," Karl chips in, nonchalantly taking a draught of water from his mug. George glares at him. "It doesn't even have to be romantic!" The fucker then has the audacity, the sheer *audacity* to raise a chestnut-brown eyebrow, a teasing simper on his face. "Unless...?"

"There's *no* unless!" Cheeks aflame, George whirls to defend himself, the blatant *lie* spewing from his lips before he has any time to think about it

"Then why can't you say it?" Sapnap pushes. George hates him.

"Yeah," Dream adds. There's a strange sort of look on his face. "Why can't you?"

The answer comes to mind easily. He's spent sleepless night after sleepless night thinking about this, thinking about *Dream*, and he just... he just *can't*.

George isn't good at hiding his emotions. He suppresses them, keeps them under lock and key, but they always manage to overflow somehow, evident through the redness constantly seeping into his

cheeks, the deep furrowing that his brows do whenever he's concerned.

If he says those three words— if he says those three words to *Dream*, there'll be no hiding of the sincerity in them, no hiding of the way he's practically bursting at the seams to say them, no hiding of how he doesn't mean it in the way Dream expects him to, the dumb, *platonic* way that Dream always means whenever *he* says them, and

God, George can already see it. The way Dream's expression will morph from shocked to disgust to *pity*, because George will have ruined *everything* with those three words, since Dream doesn't love George the way George wants him to, and George doesn't— George *can't* lose this, not when Dream's every smile gives him the hope to carry on, not when Dream's every touch leaves him burning with life, and with that simple phrase, all that will slip from his grasp in an instant.

"No," George says finally. He takes in a breath, ignores the way tension spikes immediately at his one word, and repeats it. "No."

The unreadable expression on Dream's face quickly morphs into a frown. "Why not?"

"I just—" There's a lump in his throat that refuses to go away, no matter how many times he swallows. "I just *can't*, okay?"

"You know I love *you*, George," Dream says, standing up and pinning him with an almost *vulnerable* look that makes guilt shoot up, "why can't you just say it back?

"I *can't*. Why can't *you* just accept that?" He spits, a sudden aggression taking over. It's easy to fall into his anger. Anger is easier than whatever the fuck else he's feeling right now.

"That's not an *answer*, George." Dream's raising his voice too, his frown deepening into something resembling a scowl. Something in George tears at the sight of having it directed at *him*. "You always do this, you know?"

The words pierce right through his chest, tearing apart his walls and digging straight into his innermost insecurities.

"You always just take and take and *take*, and you expect people to keep *giving*." Dream laughs, and it's dry and so un-Dream-like that George wants to throw up.

The whole conversation feels wrong, like it never should have happened, and George feels like he's spiralling out of control. "I never *asked* for you to keep giving in the first place. You're accusing me of asking for things you've given to me of your own accord." If his voice shakes, no one mentions it.

"Fuck, George," Dream runs a hand through his hair and staggers back as if George's words had physically hit him, and George hates himself for wishing that it was *his* hand resting in Dream's blonde locks instead, even in that moment, "if you didn't *want* to say it back, all you had to do was say the word."

No.

Nononononono *no*. That's not it at all, Dream has it all *wrong*—

George gasps, panic quickly washing over him and drenching him in cold, *cold* regret, "No, wait— Dream!"

Dream sends George a last, fleeting look that reminds George of shattered glass, stalks to the door,

throws it open, and flees from their cabin.

The door slams to a close in his wake, loud and jarring. Everything catches up to George in that single moment, overwhelming him and sending his vision swimming. Fuck, what has he *done*?

He doesn't register that Sapnap and Karl are still in the room until he crumbles, burying his face in his hands and resting his elbows on his knees. Sapnap has a hand on his shoulder as he whispers apologies, and Karl rubs circles into his back comfortingly.

George doesn't feel comforted.

The day passes by in a blur. George spends the entire afternoon with the covers pulled over his head, chest throbbing with an empty ache as his mind replays the morning's events like a broken record.

Sapnap sticks his head in occasionally, guilt knitting his brows together as he coaxes George out with a rare softness to his words.

George doesn't answer.

It isn't until Karl deems the situation bad enough to burst in and demand he *eat something, it's been more than twelve hours*, that he responds, dragging his feet to the dining table and nibbling on dinner sluggishly. Try as he might, he can't tear his eyes away from the empty seat across him, where there are smiley faces engraved nearly everywhere in the wood of the chair, and he can almost see its owner sitting on it, laughing and heaping more carrots on to George's plate, simply because George had offhandedly mentioned he likes carrots once—

His eyes burn and he gets up from his chair, leaving his nearly untouched food on the table as he makes his way back into his room. He shuts the door behind him and feels a pang as the slamming of *another* door echoes in his head, before collapsing onto his bed without another thought.

I'm so tired, he thinks, closing his eyes against the darkness of his room. Gold-like eyes, sharp and broken, burn into the back of his mind.

He wonders where Dream is. Is he okay? Has he eaten anything? When will he be coming back? Will he ever come back? Or has George ruined everything?

George doesn't sleep.

It's hours later, when worry has gnawed a hole through his chest, that he gets up. He creeps through the cabin, his sock-clad feet padding gently against the wooden planks of their floor as he walks to Dream's room.

He pauses there, hand on the door handle, and hesitates. It's not like he's never been into Dream's room before. They've hung out in there multiple times. Whether they're just caught up in the conversation, or if George just had a bad dream and needs *some* form of reassurance that everyone

was alright, Dream's room is usually the place they talk in.

And hell, if the stinging in his chest doesn't grow at the reminder of the two of them, just being themselves together, with Dream making it his goal to get George as flustered as possible and George's goal to get Dream to make that wheeze-laugh he always does, and their fingers always centimeters-close next to each other on Dream's sheets as happiness tumbles from their lips.

George will give anything to know if Dream is safe right now.

He pushes open the door slowly, peeking through the gap between said door and the doorway. His eyes search for any signs of life on the bed.

It doesn't look like it's been touched since this morning. The sheets are smoothed, the pillows fluffed, and Dream's mask remains unmoving on the table.

Anxiety digs into his chest. Dream hasn't come back, then.

"What are you doing?" A quiet voice asks.

George jerks his head up and his eyes connect with Dream's. Something sparks in his chest. The blonde is sitting on his windowsill, legs dangling over the inner wall as he stares curiously at George.

George stumbles back, relief crashing into him like waves against a cliff. "Oh." He gives Dream a once over, subtly checking for injuries, and nods when he finds none. "You're back."

"Yeah." Dream hops from the windowsill onto the carpet of his floor. His voice is stiff.

Where were you? George resists the urge to ask. He tamps down the concern rising in his throat. Dream is back. That's all that matters.

George's gaze drops to his shoes. His heart hurts. "Well, goodnight, then." He hopes Dream didn't hear the crack in his voice on the word "goodnight".

Backing away, George reaches for the door handle to pull the door shut.

"George. Wait."

And he does. He's never been one to refuse Dream. Could never find it in himself to do so.

"Come back in," Dream continues, his gentle voice washing over George smoothly, "close the door."

He's aware of Dream's eyes carefully following his every move as he complies, feeling hairs rise on the back of his neck when he turns around to face him. His gaze flickers up to Dream's and all the air in his lungs leaves in a single whoosh. There's an intensity in Dream's eyes that George has never seen before, an intensity that wraps around George's heart and pulls it down, down, down.

George thinks he's sinking.

"I'm... I'm sorry." Dream says. His expression is earnest and guilt-ridden. "I shouldn't have reacted like that."

"I'm sorry too," George murmurs, slowly, "I... I didn't mean it like that." His chest twinges. God knows he doesn't mean it like that, knows just how much he wants to say the words, knows why he can't say them.

"I just— I don't know what came over me." Dream's arm raises to rub at the back of his neck. "I got... overwhelmed, I guess."

George nods, and feels tears burn at the back of his eyes. He drags in a shaky inhale, and tries to keep his composure. "I'm *really* sorry." His vision blurs. "I seriously didn't mean that— didn't mean to *hurt* you—"

And then Dream's arms are around his back and his face is hidden in Dream's shoulder, and he falls into Dream's embrace as easily as breathing, his shoulders shaking uncontrollably as his tears stain Dream's hoodie. He breathes in and almost chokes on the familiar scent of pine and *home*, pressing himself even closer as if to remind himself that Dream is solid and *real*.

"I thought—" He sucks in air through his teeth. "I thought you weren't coming back." *That I'd lost you, all because I was selfish and scared.*

He feels Dream press his lips into his hair. "I'll always come back." His voice is tender. "I'll always come back to you, George."

George tilts his head upwards.

Dream's eyes are mesmerising. It's almost as if galaxies swirl within the two orbs, leaving trails of stardust and making his eyes twinkle with a passion George has never seen anywhere else. His hand goes up to cradle Dream's cheek, and he relishes in the way he can *hear* Dream's breath hitch, can *feel* Dream leaning into his touch, can *see* how pink dusts across his cheekbones, even in the dark.

And it's moments like these, where it's just the two of them, where Dream looks at him like he's the sun and the moon and everything in between, that he dares to hope. That he dares to imagine. *What would it be like, for them to have each other?*

"Can I?" Dream asks, gaze flickering to George's lips. His voice is breathy and his words tremble. His eyes hold a tinge of desperation.

George rubs his thumb over the patch of smooth skin just below Dream's eye, revels in the way his hand fits perfectly against the lines of Dream's jaw, and nods.

Dream's mouth is against his in a smooth, fluid motion. George nearly sighs into his lips, pent up tension over the last few *years* escaping him in a single movement. His hands slide up into Dream's golden hair, gripping at the soft locks as they press harder and closer against one another. Dream lifts his hands to cup George's chin, and George has never felt so *whole*.

When they break apart, something bubbles up his throat, and before he knows it, George is pouring his heart out into the air in between them.

"I love you," he says, breathless, and though the words are foreign on his tongue, they feel *right*, "I love you *so* much, and I've always been scared of saying it because whenever *you* said it it sounded like a joke, and I could never really tell if you liked me *that* way or not, and—"

"Oh my *God*, George," Dream groans, but his face glows with adoration, "shut *up*."

And he does, his eyes fluttering shut as he leans in for another kiss, and he isn't disappointed when he feels Dream's hot breath on his lips, before the new yet familiar sensation of Dream's mouth on his swoops in and wipes all traces of thought from his brain. This kiss is slower, sugar-sweet and honey-smooth as they take their time to know each other in this strange and fascinating way, exploring boundaries and getting used to the tingling and lightheadedness that comes after they pull

apart.

"I thought I made it so obvious." Dream says, when they're snuggled up to each other on his bed, fully clothed, legs tangled and fingers intertwined, "And I thought you just weren't interested. But sometimes you'd look at me and I'd get confused, because you sent me mixed signals and I just couldn't—" he sighs and rests his head on George's.

"I'm sorry," George mumbles, squeezing their hands together and leaning deeper into Dream's side.

"Don't be sorry, stupid," Dream squeezes his hands back. "I was being dumb too."

George hums. "Anyway, we have each other now, don't we?"

Dream laughs, pressing a kiss into George's hair, and George's heart overflows. "Yeah, we do."

End Notes

hi again what's up y'all still doing good?? HAJDHJASH i spent like a month working on this it would mean the absolute world to me if y'all could like comment and kudos
tysm i love you guys byeee

pspspspspspsps also i just made this but come say hi on twitter :))) [@vrealitical](#)

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